Open Space

Open Space is an open participation method in which participants decide for themselves which topics they want to discuss. The process is guided only by a shared overarching theme. The specific questions explored and the direction of the discussions emerge from the interests and ideas of the participants themselves. The method is particularly effective when bringing together a wide range of perspectives, experiences, and ideas. Participants are free to move between discussion groups, introduce new topics, or simply listen. This creates a dynamic, self-organised environment for dialogue and collaboration.

Participation Depth	Inform
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Understanding & Gathering Perspectives
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 - 3 Hours, 1 Day
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Organised Actors
Group Size	Medium Group up to 30, Large Group from 30
Characteristics	Activating, Creative

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of Open Space is to make the knowledge, experiences, and ideas within a group visible and to develop them collaboratively. Participants shape the process themselves by proposing discussion topics and organising their own conversations. This often leads to creative discussions, new perspectives, and practical ideas for future projects or continued collaboration.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the overarching theme
Choose a broad theme that provides a common focus for the event.

Important:

The theme should be open enough to allow a variety of questions and discussion topics to emerge.

Examples include:

- "The Future of the City Centre"
- "Mobility in the Neighbourhood"
- "How Do We Want to Shape Our City Together?"

2. Prepare the venue

Provide:

- a large room for the plenary sessions
- several smaller discussion areas or breakout rooms
- flexible seating arrangements
- sufficient space for participants to move between groups

The atmosphere should feel open, welcoming, and informal.

3. Organise the documentation
Decide:

- how the results will be documented
- who will support the documentation process
- where the collected results will be displayed or stored

Helpful materials include:

- flipcharts
- pinboards
- digital collaboration boards or shared documents

Important:

Participants should know from the outset that the discussion outcomes will be documented.

4. Inform participants
Before the event, explain that:

- participants are expected to propose their own discussion topics
- there are no pre-planned workshops
- initiative and active participation are encouraged

This is particularly helpful for participants who are unfamiliar with the Open Space format.

Execution

1. Welcome and introduction

At the beginning of the event, the facilitation team explains:

- the overarching theme
- the programme and schedule
- the principles of Open Space

A key principle is the Law of Two Feet:

Participants are encouraged to leave a discussion group and join another whenever they feel that:

- they are no longer learning anything new, or
- they are no longer able to contribute meaningfully.

This principle keeps the process dynamic and self-organised.

2. Collect discussion topics
Participants consider:

- Which questions would they like to discuss?
- Which topics are important to them?
- What experiences or ideas would they like to share?

They then briefly present their proposed topics to the whole group.

Examples include:

- "How can youth participation be improved?"
- "What ideas could make school routes safer?"
- "How can public spaces become greener?"

The proposed topics are displayed so that everyone can choose where to participate.

3. Form discussion groups
For each proposed topic, participants agree on:

- a meeting place
- a time slot
-

if appropriate, a person responsible for hosting the discussion

The participant who proposed the topic usually acts as the host of that discussion group.

Everyone else is free to decide:

- which discussion to join
- when to move to another group

4. Self-organised working sessions
The discussion groups work independently.

They may:

- generate ideas
- discuss challenges
- develop possible solutions
- exchange experiences
- identify next steps

Important:

Each group is responsible for documenting its own results.

The facilitation team provides organisational support where needed but interferes as little as possible with the content of the discussions.

5. Plenary presentations
After the working sessions, all participants come back together.

Each group presents:

- key insights
- ideas
- proposals
- open questions

The plenary discussion then provides an opportunity to:

- ask questions
- add further ideas
- identify common themes across the different groups

Evaluation

1. Bring the results together
Collect all documentation, including:

- flipcharts
- maps
- notes
- digital documents

Organise the outcomes according to their main themes.

2. Prepare the documentation
Create a clear and accessible summary of all discussion results.

Important:

The documentation should be shared with all participants as soon as possible after the event.

3. Define the next steps
Together with the participants, consider:

- Which topics should be explored further?
- Which groups would like to continue working together?
- Which ideas can be implemented?

Open Space often serves as the starting point for longer-term collaboration and follow-up activities.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- a broad range of topics should be explored
-

participants are encouraged to contribute their own ideas

- addressing open-ended questions without predetermined solutions
- dialogue, networking, and knowledge exchange are central objectives
- working with large groups representing diverse perspectives

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- specific outcomes or decisions have already been determined
- a fixed agenda or tightly structured programme is required
- participants are unlikely to take initiative
- working in highly hierarchical environments without an open discussion culture

TIPS

- Encourage participants to propose their own discussion topics.
- Not every discussion group needs to produce perfect results—the exchange of ideas is the primary objective.
- Allow sufficient time for spontaneous conversations and movement between groups.
- The method works best with open-minded, motivated participants who are willing to organise themselves.
- An informal atmosphere helps foster creativity, dialogue, and active participation.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- formal decision-making processes
- highly structured events with a fixed agenda
- groups with limited willingness or ability to self-organise
- topics with very tight time constraints or predetermined outcomes

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/open-space